

John Laird's appointment to state's top environmental post draws praise, ire

By Kurtis Alexander - Santa Cruz Sentinel

Posted: 01/05/2011 06:46:55 PM PST



John Laird

Former Santa Cruz legislator John Laird on Wednesday was officially appointed California Secretary for Natural Resources, a widely expected announcement that is evoking joy in environmental circles and striking fear in many Republicans.

As one of Gov. Jerry Brown's cabinet members, Laird, a longtime environmentalist, will coordinate more than two dozen state agencies and commissions, from state parks to water resources, and be at the center of such hot-button issues as water shortages in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, funding for parks and wildlife protection.

Laird, 60, declined to discuss specific policy matters before convening with the new governor. But he said he looks forward to bringing his record of environmental activism as a three-term assemblyman and two-term Santa Cruz mayor to the new job.

"I care about the future of parks and the future of water and the future of fish and game protection and marine protection, and they're all right here," said Laird, a Democrat.

Laird, who was in Sacramento on Wednesday, was in his new office on the 13th floor of the State Resources Building, meeting with his new staff, within minutes of his appointment.

Laird concedes California's \$28 billion deficit will limit the state's environmental progress. But as an expert on government finances - having served as Assembly Budget Committee chair for four years - he expects to make the most of what's available.

"The status of state bonds and the budget is really going to affect some of the things that are in the purview of the Resources Agency," he said, noting, for example, the dip in the number of grants that fund environmental protection and water projects. "It's not going to be easy."

One of the most immediate issues facing Laird and the new administration will be the collapse of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, a central link in the state's water supply. The Legislature expects to put a bond on the 2012 ballot to help combat threats to the delta, but voters have been wary of the cost.

"Everybody has to try to work together to get to a solution and everybody is going to get something in the end," he said of the delta's problems. "That's going to be the challenge, keeping people working together."

A chronically under-funded state park system and a lack of funding for wildlife wardens are other issues facing California's natural resources agencies.

Warner Chabot, chief executive officer of the California League of Conservation Voters, called Brown's choice of Laird "superb."

"This shows that Gov. Brown is trying to balance someone with strong environmental credentials and someone who understands the complexities and the difficulties of the budget process," Chabot said.

Political observers say the appointment underscores Brown's commitment to the environment. Also Tuesday, Brown reappointed Democrat Mary Nichols to chair of the California Air Resources Board. He's expected to appoint a new Secretary of Environmental Protection, another top environmental post, with the anticipated retirement of Linda Adams.

"There are different shades of green within the environmental movement, and Jerry Brown has always been aligned with the greenest," said Thad Kousser, a professor of politics at UC San Diego. "I see Brown taking lots of steps to making sure California stays as the forefront of environmentalism."

This has many Republicans concerned.

"Any notion that Jerry Brown plans to pursue a moderate and centrist course on these issues has just flown out the window," said Ron Nehring, chair of the California Republican Party. "He's reaching to the far left of the far left to fill his administration."

Critics worry that environmental policies of the incoming administration could stifle business and economic recovery, violate individual property rights and run up public spending.

"Now is not the time for more intrusive government," Nehring said.

Representing Santa Cruz and the 27th Assembly District, Laird pushed an agenda of strong environmental protection while in the Legislature. He co-authored California's climate change bill AB32, passed legislation promoting water conservation and established the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency designed to protect the mountain region.

"He's uniquely qualified, given his legislative experience and his commitment to the environment," said the governor's spokesman Evan Westrup. "He has had a career of commitment to the state's rich natural resources, and we expect him to further that commitment in his new position.

In the job, Laird will earn \$175,000 annually. The position is subject to Senate confirmation.

Laird, who has been teaching at his alma mater UC Santa Cruz, has maintained a condo in Sacramento since he was termed out of the Assembly two years ago. He expects to use this as a base for his the new job.